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ABSTRACT

When students submit their writing for evaluation, teachers too often respond in fixed ways that create images of the evaluator as preacher, as police officer, as stenographer, as computer specialist, or as obsessive-compulsive. Instead of creating a fixed, or "tied," image that promotes predictable, stereotyped student responses, teachers may create a "free" image for students by focusing on students' individual needs as writers. Such an approach is based on the assumptions that the writers and their work are worthy, that evaluation should motivate students, that evaluation must be individualized, that the writing teacher should respect students' ideas and words, and that evaluation can never be an end in itself but must play a role in teaching the writing process. (GW)

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Creating Images: Evaluation and the Writing Teacher

Images are the English teacher's stock-in-trade. We cite, interpret, ask, or even plead for them in literature or student writing. We know, too, that students develop images from teaching styles and are bemused when we hear of them in the hallways or read them in the campus newspaper. The stuff of college life, legend, and nostalgia, we say, harmless or even helpful in "giving the old place character." But some images do indeed hurt, both student and teacher. I have in mind certain images that too often reflect the way we evaluate student writing. If we were to look at them, I think we would confront images we don't acknowledge of ourselves or roles we don't want to play, even if casting is according to type.

The cue, of course, comes when students submit their writing for evaluation. Our response creates the images or roles, which, from my experience, seem to evolve from either the motives or methods for evaluating a piece of writing. I suspect we are all painfully familiar with some of them, In the category of motives, or why we evaluate:

> 1. The evaluator as Preacher. Generally concerned with the practical necessity of writing skills, he or she evaluates the writer with the noble mission of saving him for the next world. In high school he prepares the flock for Freshman English, and in Freshman English for the rigorous philosophy course or for life-after-college. For him, laarning to write is frequently perceived in quasi-theological terms as a "test" in which the writer's soul may be either saved or damned, depending upon how well he abides by scripture.

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2. The evaluator as Great White Hunter. Relentlessly tramping through the jungle of primitive writing, he searches out and destroys unlettered species. At the end of the track, he has bagged his trophy, a skewered piece of student writing.

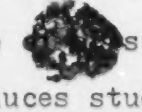
3. The evaluator as Policeman. The most familiar image perhaps, he patrols the composition beat as a symbol of literary authority. Appointed by society and guided by the high-minded purpose of cleaning up poor student writing, he frequently arrests writers in their tracks, but expects to rehabilitate them.

In the second category, methods, or, how one evaluates:

1. The evaluator as Stenographer. His system of evaluation requires writing marginalia pointing out "frags," "awks," "refs," and "puncts." Curiously, he believes that before students can truly master longhand, they must learn shorthand.

2. The evaluator as Computer Specialist. Alternately writing teacher and mathematician, he totals up an error count and feeds it to the computer, which spits out the appropriate grade. Low grades inevitably reflect the maxim of software specialists: "Garbage in, garbage out."

3. The evaluator as Obsessive-Compulsive. He has a hangup or two about specific, annoying writing habits of his students, perhaps involving commas, spelling, titles, length, even paper weight. Students try to identify this fixation early on, so as not to be labeled "one of them" and elicit a bad grade.

There are, of course, other images we might add. And then there are those which we have for ourselves and which probably resemble not in the least those mentioned above. The primary image we have  selves is Teacher - one who imparts knowledge and induces students to learn. And therein lies the rub. Why shouldn't evaluation allow students to see us as teachers? How can evaluation itself teach? The answers to these fundamental questions may be found, again, in the consideration of images.

Images are sometimes described as being either "tied" or "free." A tied image is one that has the same meaning for nearly everyone, while the free image may evoke multiple meanings or associations. The Preacher, the Policeman, the Stenographer, et al. can be considered tied images. Approaching student writing and, consequently, evaluation from the same, limited perspective, these images create the same, limited impression for most class members. No matter what the assignment, no matter what the subject, form, language or tone of the writing, they can be expected to respond in a predictable, stereotyped manner.

The Teacher, however, creates a "free" image. He creates various meanings for various students because he responds to their individual needs as writers. He does this by making the focus of the course not himself or his method, but the student's own writing. He begins, as Donald Murray says, simply by listening and placing the opportunity for discovery in the student's own hands.[1] He knows that less is frequently more. He assists the writer by probing, suggesting, coaching. He does not in his evaluation rewrite the paper for the student. He responds as a reader, as a recipient of written communication. He tells the student that he does not understand the meaning of this passage, that it might have to be more fully explained or illustrated. He suggests the student might want to read a passage aloud to hear if a sentence is

well-paced or if his words really say what he intends. Or he might inform the writer that his subject seems to have been found but that his language is not vital enough to capitalize on that potential. In all cases, the reason for the writing and its evaluation is that the writer and his work are worthy.

Such an approach rests on certain assumptions that the writing teacher makes as part of his instructional goals. The first is that evaluation needs to motivate students, not depress them. It should begin by looking for things that are promising in their writing, worth the labor involved in improving the expression of an idea or in the refocusing of that idea. In doing so, both teacher and student can come to share a mutual appreciation for their combined efforts, Research and experience have always indicated that motivation, and not necessarily cultural or intellectual background, is the key to improving student writing. Evaluation, which is at the heart of writing, must then inspire a student to seek informed criticism, not run from it.

A corollary assumption about the evaluation of writing is that it must be individualized. The right kind of evaluation shares the personal interest of each student in his writing. The teacher knows that writing is itself an individual, even lonely act that issues its own subject, form, tone, and audience, and he evaluates it accordingly. Consequently, he does not "correct" the paper according to some mythical prescription or some narrow model. He explores the subject

with the student, suggests internal problems, and, in turn, invites the student to suggest alternative ways to solve them. In effect, he has no "pat" approach to evaluation and treats his student's words and ideas as he would want his own treated.

By necessity this means that the writing teacher should respect his student's language, a principle which need not be confused with or mired in any politically controversial philosophy. Since language is an extension of personality, to brush it aside or even to insult it can only be self-defeating. Too often, as Hans Guth has noted, we suffer from "a basic orientation that puts the emphasis not on where language succeeds but on where it fails."[2] Writing should thus be an opportunity for achievement, not failure, and evaluation not a means of catching mistakes, but of reinforcing whatever trust has been created in the classroom or in conference. If evaluation makes a student's writing seem like spoiled meat, how can one expect him to want to even touch it, let alone carve it up for revision? The real teacher of writing considers the student's ideas and words respectfully, even if they disappear in revision.

Finally, evaluation can never be an end in itself but must have a role to play in teaching the writing process. Evaluation should entice, not terminate further writing. It is not a justification for having done the writing or for giving a grade. Evaluation, like education in general, is

intervention. A teacher's responsibility is to intervene in a way that does, in fact, teach. By structuring evaluation as part of the writing process, the student should see that it can indeed improve his writing. It should spur him on to the next draft of that paper, and to the one after that, until the student says it is finished and that he has taken it as far as time, circumstances, and interest will allow.

Ultimately, of course, the student's image of the writing teacher is derived from the teacher's image of his students. If he sees them as potentially effective writers, they will see him as a potentially effective teacher. Such a relationship actually frees both teacher and students of images of each other and directs attention to images on paper, the kind that advance, not interfere, with good writing.

NOTES

[1]Donald M. Murray. A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 15-17.

[2]Hans P. Guth, English for a New Generation (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 6.